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Retrograde hits print

UTD's student paper kicks off spring semester by introducing print edition

MARIA SHAIKH
Managing Editor

After four months in publication, UTD's official student-run newspaper *The Retrograde* is releasing its inaugural print issue

Jan. 23.

The Retrograde currently plans to publish a new print issue at least once a month, totaling at least four print issues per semester in fall and spring and three issues over the summer. Readers can pick up print copies of *The Retrograde* from any of the Mercury-branded newsstand kiosks across campus or from *The Retrograde's* on-campus boothing and tabling events, and can continue accessing articles and puzzles online at retrogradenews.com.

The print edition will contain the most recent batch of news, life & arts and opinion stories *The Retrograde* publishes, and will be distributed around campus the first Thursday of each month during fall and spring semesters, barring university holidays or extenuating circumstances. If *The Retrograde* is able to publish more frequently, papers will also be distributed the third Thursday of each month. Subsequent print issues will contain

comics and activities including crosswords and sudoku puzzles, crime blotters and reprinted stories from former student newspaper *The Mercury's* archives about timely, topical or interesting subject matter.

Occasionally, *The Retrograde* will release a special issue dedicated to a specific theme or commemorating an event that may deviate from the standard print issue format. Special issues may have fewer pages, sport fewer articles, lack comics and activities or police blotters or be released outside of *The Retrograde's* typical publishing schedule depending on the needs of UTD's community. Examples of special issues under *The Mercury* include the May 20, 2024 issue detailing and investigating the police response to UTD's May 1 student protest and the March 18 issue from earlier that year discussing student deaths.

The print edition is currently financed entirely through the advertisements in its pages and does not rely on grants or donations given to *The Retrograde*. UTD and other academic pro-

grams, community members and local and national businesses and organizations can purchase advertisements with *The Retrograde* at the discretion of the Editor-in-Chief and finance department. *The Retrograde* does not officially endorse any of the content or services promoted in its print or web advertisements and reserves the right to turn away any potential advertiser.

The Retrograde is in a continuous state of change and will update readers if any changes to print frequency, distribution or financing are made.

All print issues of *The Retrograde* will be accessible as digital PDFs through the website. Non-local readers and readers unable to find a particular issue of *The Retrograde* can contact theretrogradenews@gmail.com so a copy can be saved and sent to them.

'I hope we have a president who is ethical'

At town hall, students and employees insist UTD's next president needs to prioritize people and maintenance, not growth

MARIA SHAIKH
Managing Editor

Around 50 students, faculty and staff shared the qualities they want to see in UTD's next president with members of the Presidential Search Advisory Committee in a Jan. 17 town hall meeting, overwhelmingly calling for the university to better support its constituents after years of imbalance, which has caused what attendees called a suicidal student population and crumbling institutional support structure.

The town hall, organized by the Academic Senate, was moderated by Michael Kesden, physics professor and senate chair, and attended by administrative services officer Heather Oltmann, associate professor of management Sarah Moore and materials science professor Amy Walker, all four of whom are on the search committee. The remaining committee members directly affiliated with UTD — management dean Hasan Pirkul, philosophy senior and Student Government president Devin Schwartz and alum John Olajide — were not present. Kesden said the committee members could not

share any new information about the search process because of signing non-disclosure agreements and they were only interested in community feedback about what UTD's next president should prioritize. Multiple community members stressed the need for "quality over quantity."

"I hope we have a president who is ethical," Roger Melina, physics professor and BAHT endowed chair, said during the meeting. "We now have a very successful program in recruiting international students ... if you're an international student, paying for a visa is not a simple problem. How does a university attract international students and actually help them stay in this country? I work with Jennifer Lynch in the Career Center, they're just overwhelmed with unhappy, suicidal students."

Multiple staff members discussed insufficient hiring and support of UTD's non-faculty employees and called for a president who will hire more staff. Cerise Hawker, assistant to the dean of undergraduate education, mentioned how multiple high-level offices suffer from small team sizes and excessive work-

loads, and Michelle Rinehart, program manager with the Office of Institutional Risk and Safety, said at one point UTD was employing a single plumber to service the entire campus.

"Our next president needs to figure out how to create a balance," Rinehart said. "If we don't put an effort into this balance of trying to get our name out there, trying to grow, trying to do all these exciting things ... with making sure we don't crumble, whether that's in terms of our facilities, our [staff and faculty] ... I know that it's not glamorous, but we're reaching a little bit of a bubble and I'm afraid we're going to pop."

Rinehart, who mentioned that UTD's buildings need millions of dollars of back maintenance, was joined by other students and employees in opposing the university's laser focus on expansion without tending to the people and facilities already present. Computer science professor Ravi Prakash said the president should ensure an increased budget for faculty research and staff assistance and significantly increase the library budget. However, expansion itself wasn't opposed; multiple com-

munity members stressed a need for the next president to continue developing UTD's brand and name recognition.

"Part of [being an alum] has been the frustration over the past 30 years that people still don't know what UTD is and what we do," Paul Nichols, associate professor of management and UTD alum, said. "I am not interested in [the new president's] Ph.D., what their research or academic background is, what I need ... is someone who is eager to knock on doors, to talk to executives and boardrooms about what UTD is and what we're great at."

Every student who spoke at the meeting echoed the need for balance between UTD's various goals. Animation and games senior Sasha Wu said UTD has an extensive history of presidents being neglectful of students' needs and wishes.

"I would like to see [someone] more concerned, more considerate of student voices," Wu said. "I would like to see someone who is able to take criticism and feedback and respond thoughtfully instead of holing up with little response or answer as we have seen in the past."

The search committee is accepting

individual nominations for the next president as well as general comments. Physics professor Anvar Zakhidov said Kay Bailey Hutchinson, a former U.S. Senator representing Texas, was a significant force in developing UTD's nanotechnology program and recommended her for the position of president for her work ethic and "calm and wise" demeanor.

The search committee does not select the new president itself, and instead recommends individuals to the UT System Board of Regents, which ultimately determines the finalists and new president.

Despite staff and faculty comprising the majority of town hall attendees, there are only three faculty members — representing ECS, JSOM and NSM — and one staff member on the 17-person search committee. Including Schwartz and Pirkul, only seven committee members are currently employed by or studying at UTD, while the rest work for the UT System, other UT schools or are classified as alumni or community members.

SEE [COUNCIL](#), PAGE 4

Winter protests round out 2024 as UTD's most political year

UTD's history of student protest and activism, while brief, has far-reaching consequences for free expression on campus

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

Editor's Note: The Retrograde utilized Al Mitchell's chronology collection of early UTD history in conjunction with the physical Mercury archives to access publicly recorded history of UTD. Because of campus administration's attempts to withhold the degrees of student demonstrators who graduated in spring 2024, the fall 2024 graduate quoted in this article has been granted anonymity.

Since its founding in 1969, UTD has experienced exponential growth and a rapidly transforming student culture, turning what was once a highly-specialized private institution into a populous public university. Among the many changes the university has faced is the dramatic rise of student activism, with

2024 marking the most politically active year on campus.

Student protesters disrupting graduations on Dec. 16 and 17 last year joined 28 total documented protests on UTD's campus, with 71.4% of those protests occurring within the past four years. While students have demonstrated for a wide array of causes, including but not limited to divestment from apartheid South Africa, opposition to space laser programs and mass evictions, the issue central to the majority of recorded student protests has been Israel's occupation of Palestine.

The Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at UTD has organized 21 of the documented protests as part of its ongoing divestment campaign, which calls on UTD and the UT System as a whole

to divest from weapons manufacturers that sell arms to Israel.

The Dec. 16 and 17 graduation protests included students marching across the stage with Palestinian flags that read "Divest from Death." Former SJP president Mousa Najjar was escorted out of his spring 2024 graduation for doing the same. No students were detained or escorted out during the fall 2024 graduations.

An alum from Gaza who had protested at their fall 2024 graduation said that while graduation was an exciting achievement for them, they wanted to ensure people remembered the thousands of students in Gaza who have been denied that chance because of Israel's



ALEXANDER LAWLESS | RETROGRADE STAFF

Comets and community members protest at the Plinth on May 1 after the police raid of the Gaza Liberation Plaza.

SEE [PROTESTS](#), PAGE 4

Public records revealed

Over 1,000 internal university emails related to May 1 arrests reveal admin misinforming students and changing policy

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

Editor's Note: The UTD SJP officer interviewed for this piece is one of the nine students of the "UTD 21": the 21 students, faculty and community members arrested at the May 1 encampment. Because the SJP officer is currently facing legal charges, The Retrograde has granted their request for anonymity. They are referred to as "an SJP representative" throughout this article.

The first 2,000 pages of public records requested by student journalists at UTD reveal rapid changes to university procedure, alumni outrage, ridicule of students and administration's disregard for transparency.

On May 1, 2024, 21 students, professors, alumni and community members were arrested when police raided a peaceful protest at UTD. Since then, students, faculty and civil rights organizations have heavily criticized UTD's use of violent force to shut down student activism. Campus administrators have been silent in the face of this outrage and ignored multiple requests from student and community journalists seeking information. One schoolwide email sent May 1 at 8:42 p.m. and President Richard Benson publishing an opinion piece justifying law enforcement's use in the *Dallas Morning News* is all administrators have publicly said about the May 1 arrests as of this article's publication.

UTD's former student publication, *The Mercury*, began fundraising July 15 to pay the \$2,904.30 cost to access public records regarding the events before, during and after May 1. After successfully paying the fee, student journalists received four batches of documents containing communications sent to and shared between university officials, with more on the way. After *The Mercury's* dissolution, *The Retrograde* continued receiving and analyzing the documents.

The Retrograde has not been told the total number of documents it will receive, because the Office of Legal Affairs stated it sends each document batch as it compiles them. The next batch is scheduled to arrive April 30.

Less than 24 hours after the "UTD 21" had been released from Collin County Jail on bond, campus administrators made changes to the guidelines which govern how students can demonstrate on campus.

At 11:55 a.m. May 3, Dean of Students Amanda Smith emailed a group she referred to as "student leaders" of activist organization Students for Justice in Palestine with a bulleted list of guidelines related to UTDSP5001, UTD's policy on speech, expression and assembly, that she said she had previously sent them in October. The guidelines are not the text of UTDSP5001, and the Dean of Students Office said in a general message to *The Retrograde* that the intent of guidelines is to provide more specific procedures and examples than those found within official policy. *The Retrograde* reached out to SJP officers who were able to provide a copy of the rules Smith sent in October 2023. Despite Smith's claim that the guidelines document she sent on May 3 was what she had previously sent to SJP, the two documents differed. The May guidelines had new, specific language related to the May 1 encampment.

The Retrograde reached out to Smith and the Dean of Students Office with questions regarding inconsistencies between the May 3 attachment and the information students had received in October. While Smith did not directly respond for comment, UTD officials via the Office of Communications responded by email with a general statement on the matter.

"While the two documents are not identical, the intent of the changes to the May 3 document was to provide further information on university policies governing speech and assembly," the email read. "There were no changes to the policy between October and May. We are happy to meet with students if they have questions or concerns or if they want additional information on policies and procedures."

At the time of Smith's May 3 message to SJP student leaders, UTDSP5001 had been last changed on May 11, 2020. As of publication of this article, the policy was last updated June 21, 2024. The guidelines themselves underwent a series of revisions immediately before Smith communicated with the student leaders.

On May 3 at 9:58 a.m., Smith sent Student Union Director Dan Goodwin an email containing a document titled "As-

sembly guidance.docx," which is identical to the physical copy SJP received in October.

At 10:22 a.m., Goodwin responded to Smith with an email saying, "added to reflect signs/banners/flags affixed to poles" and attached was a document titled, "Assembly Guidance (1).docx," which was redacted by the Office of Legal Affairs.

At 11:23 a.m., Goodwin sent Smith, Vice President of Student Affairs Gene Fitch and Associate University Attorney Jenny Henry an email with the subject line "Updated Guidelines." Goodwin said, "[Assembly Guidance (1).docx] attached for final review." This attachment was also redacted.

At 11:48 a.m., Goodwin sent Smith, Fitch and Henry "Assembly Guidance (1).docx" with the subject line "Minor Updates to Guidelines." This attachment was also redacted.

Several things changed between the initial October draft of the document and what the office of Student Affairs prepared. Notable changes include: the addition of two completely new bullet points, an expansion on the sign policy, a change to an example provided of what cannot be said at a protest and the specification that "tents and barricades" are not allowed, something previously unspecified by the guidelines and not mentioned explicitly in UTDSP5001.

A student representative of SJP said the organization believes administrators are using their bureaucratic power to limit pro-Palestine protests

and expression on campus. The core of SJP's activities revolve around compelling UTD and the UT System to divest from major weapons manufacturers that support Israel's war effort in Gaza.

"We as a collective of students do not require administration's permission to demonstrate," the SJP representative said. "A protest with permission is just another student event. These guidelines and the unannounced changes to them are just another way administrators try to exert control when they fear that student organizations will act as student movements."

The public records also include emails from UTD alumni, community members and faculty addressed to campus administrators asking for clemency to be provided towards the peaceful protesters, for the university to drop its legal charges against arrested students and faculty and expressing dissatisfaction with university leadership.

The records also contain several ignored messages from over a dozen journalists during and after May 1. These attempts to gain any comment from university officials included but were not limited to reporters from the *Washington Post*, NBC5, Telemundo, CNN

National, ABC National, NBC National, KERA, KRLD, CBS National, *Agence France-Presse* and *The Mercury*.

Also present in the records are emails between UTD law enforcement. UTD PD chief Larry Zacharias emailed current chief Brent Tourangeau and captain Adam Perry on May 2 at 1:01 p.m., writing that the three professors arrested May 1 "should be terminated."

In response to official complaints filed against UTD's University Emergency Medical Response Director Sheila Elliot regarding her prohibition on UEMR volunteers participating in campus protests, Zacharias messaged Tourangeau and Perry to remark that not protesting is part of public service and that "if that's not what you want or believe, you should not serve in a public safety capacity nor should you pursue the medical profession."

The Retrograde is investigating why Zacharias, who retired Jan. 31, 2023, still has access to internal forms such as the UEMR grievance form, which community members used to criticize Elliot.

The documents also reveal students filing complaints and expressing concerns with how pro-Palestine student activists were demonstrating on campus. The most in-depth of these reports is found in the meeting notes prepared by Associate Dean of Students Kim Winkler after she spoke with two redacted students, who were concerned about what Winkler wrote was "this anti-

semitic culture on campus."

Winkler said in her notes that the students shared examples with her of antisemitism they faced but did not officially report during the 2023-2024 academic year. Winkler said she encouraged the students to report their concerns but that they "do not have specific names, pictures, dates or times" for the incidents.

In her notes, Winkler included a section asking the redacted students to define Arabic words with specific emphasis placed on "intifada." According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, "intifada" means "the act of shaking off" or an "uprising, rebellion," with specific context placed on the "uprising of Palestinians against Israeli tion of the West Bank and Gaza Strip." Winkler's notes translate the phrase "Intifada intifada, globalize the intifada, long live the intifada," as "wave of terrorists' attacks in Israel against the Jewish community; keep these going." "We are the intifada" is translated as "we are the killers." "There is only one solution intifada revolution" is translated as "the only solution is to kill Jews."

The Retrograde reached out to Winkler with questions regarding these notes and the translation process used. As of publication, Winkler has not responded. The SJP representative said that campus administration has not asked them to define what terms like "intifada" mean before.

"The most basic Google search is going to tell you that the word 'intifada' means 'uprising,'" the SJP representative said. "An uprising is to rise up, to stand up. The path to liberation for Palestinians requires all of Palestine to rise up. Definitions like those in Winkler's notes are a tactic used to redefine our language to fit your own narratives. It is a tactic of repression, which also shows an incredibly racist mindset."

More minute findings from the first batch of information include almost completely redacted emails from the UT System Chancellor James Milliken discussing the May 1 protest with UTD administrators and an email chain congratulating the various police departments involved with the May 1 raid on a "job well done." Included in the email chain were UTDPD Chief of Police, Brent Tourangeau; Richardson Chief of Police, Gary Tittle; Texas Department of Public Safety Regional Director, Jeremy Sherrod; DPS Director, Steven McCraw; North Texas Crime Commission Chair, David Dean and NTCC Director, Jim Hughes. Also present are the court orders for conditions of bond, provided by Collin County Jail to UTDPD for each of the UTD 21.

Due to the sheer amount of content and extensive redactions, *The Retrograde* is unable to cover everything within these records. Of the 2,284 pages reviewed by *The Retrograde*, 1,091 were fully redacted by UTD, 455 were partially redacted and 738 were unredacted. The complete set of documents can be found on *The Retrograde* website.

This article is part of an ongoing investigation into the events surrounding May 1, 2024. More details will be provided by The Retrograde as new information emerges.

“An uprising is to rise up, to stand up. The path to liberation for Palestinians requires all of Palestine to rise up.”

— SJP Representative

EXCERPTS FROM DOCUMENTS

“

While I may not agree with the political positions of protestors on May 1st, they have the right to peacefully protest. I also believe that, whether they broke any campus policy or code of conduct (which is not synonymous with breaking the law), they did not deserve the response with which they were met: dozens of riot-gear-clad officers marching in military formation with batons, guns, and armored vehicles, plus a night in jail.

(12.20, pg. 140)

— Faculty, name redacted

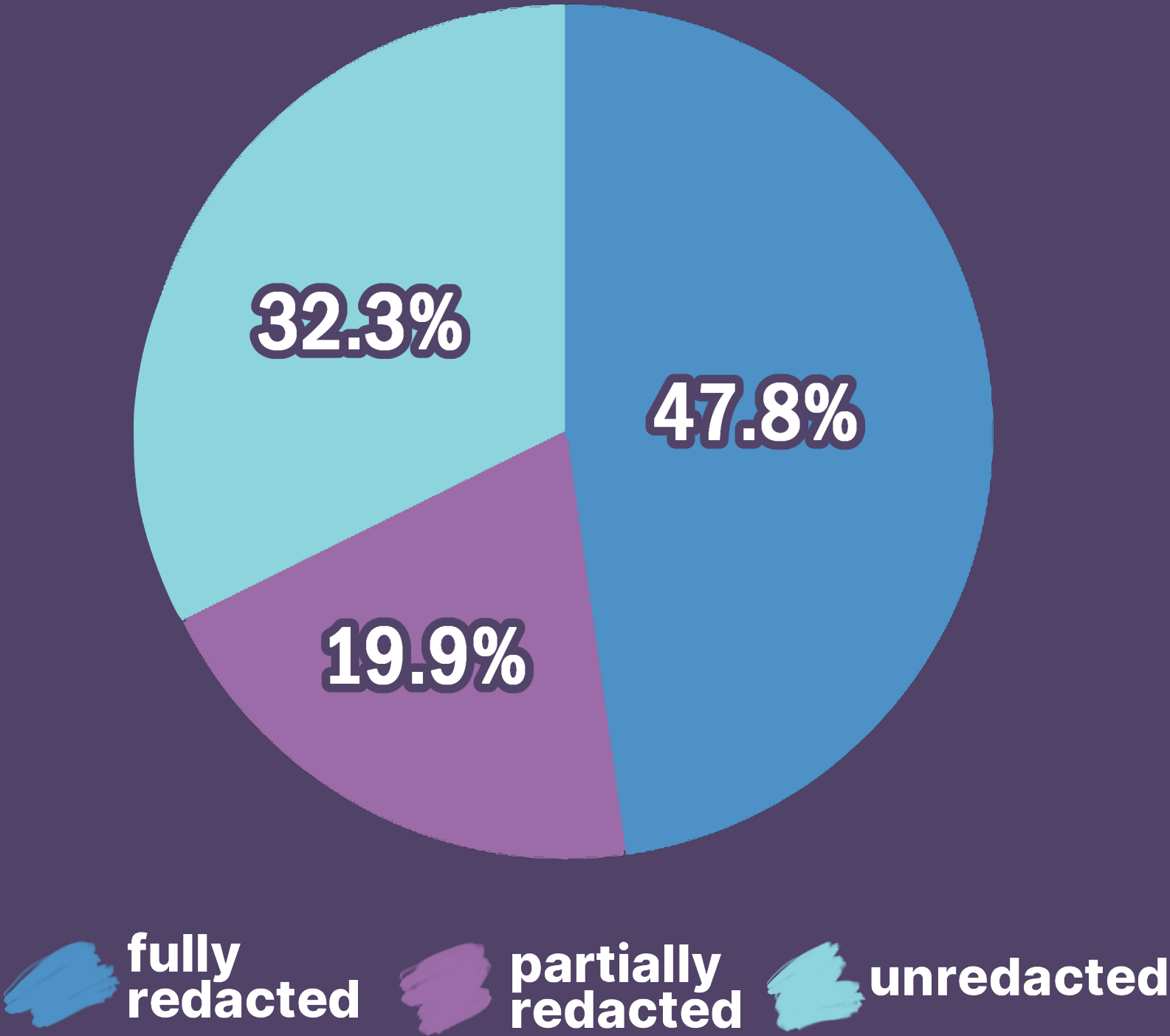
I graduated with a BS in 2022. I was a McDermott Scholar and proudly involved in campus life and culture as a Muslim student. Today I am deeply ashamed of my affiliation with UTD and will not be supporting the university without serious action on your part.

(12.20, pg. 144)

— Safiyah Zaidi, 2022 alumni

”

Out of 2,264 pages across 4 sets of documents...



PROTESTS
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

attacks. The United Nations has called Israel's actions in Gaza a "scholasticide," in part because of the last university in Gaza being destroyed Jan. 17 last year.

"This very same expression of joy has been stripped from thousands of kids no different from us in Gaza, and that our own university is complicit in that fact," the alum said. "Especially as an engineer, knowing that a lot of my classmates graduating at the same time may now think about working at a weapons manufacturer."

Palestine became more prominent on campus in 2018 when SJP began hosting more demonstrations at UTD, whose frequency rapidly increased in 2022. Prior to 2018, the only record of Palestine being mentioned at UTD appears in a 1987 opinion editorial and a 2014 article published in UTD's former student newspaper, *The Mercury*. The op-ed, titled "Remember the Palestinians" and written by then-government and politics graduate Mohammad Salem, discusses the massacres and displacement of hundreds and thousands of Palestinians since Israel's founding. The 2014 article, "Trapped in Gaza," details the experiences of a UTD student caught in conflict in Gaza when visiting.

"The Palestinian people are still looking for that day when they return to their homeland and an independent Palestinian state is created," Salem wrote in the op-ed.

From 2018 onwards, over 30 articles that discussed Palestine were published in *The Mercury*, including discussion of student poetry nights and markets at the Plinth in addition to protest coverage and opinion pieces.

Thirty-eight years after Salem's opinion was published, student demonstrators at UTD have significantly expanded their advocacy for Palestine. 2024 saw many firsts for protest action at UTD because of this activism.

April 23 marked the first time a building was occupied by a student sit-in when students calling for divestment filled the Administration Building for over seven hours. *The Mercury* reported that Nidaa Lafi, a UTD alum and former SJP president, said that because campus administrators had ignored SJP's protests and Student Government's passed divestment resolutions, the sit-in provided necessary pressure to get the Office of the President to meet with student organizers.

"If this shows us anything, it shows us that pressure works," Lafi said during the sit-in. "Being in this building, this disgusting overheated building for [hours] does something right."

The student organizers would later boycott the meeting after they were informed it would also include what SJP referred to as "Zionist organizations." Instead, SJP leaders delivered a letter to the office restating their demands.

May 1 was the first time an encampment — an escalated form of protest where activists refuse to leave an area long-term — was established on campus. It also marked the first time police and state troopers were called in to raid a student event. Prior to this raid, the only reported arrest of protesters occurred in 2000, when one protester was arrested for protesting a meeting between then-U.S. presidential candidate George W. Bush and then-Mexican president-elect Vicente Fox at UTD.

Law enforcement arrested 21 total individuals at the encampment, including nine students, three faculty and three alumni in

addition to six people unaffiliated with the school. UTD conducted disciplinary hearings throughout fall 2024 for the arrested students, ultimately resulting in written warnings, while the 21 arrestees' court cases regarding their charges of Class B criminal trespassing are still pending. If found guilty, the defendants could face fines up to \$2,000 and up to 180 days in jail.

With roughly 200 attendees, the May 1 protest remains one of the largest protests in campus history. May 1 is rivaled only by the Oct. 28, 1986 "Star Wars" protest and the June 1993 "Waterviewgate," both estimated to have roughly 200 demonstrators attending at the time.

The "Star Wars" protest, referring to the nickname given to the U.S. space-based Strategic Defense Initiative by its opponents, was the culmination of a semester-long saga that dominated the pages of *The Mercury* throughout fall 1986. Controversy first erupted in August, after physics professor Carl Collins received a \$1.8 million contract from the federal government to continue his research on a gamma-ray laser because of its potential usefulness in strategic defense.

A month later, the Sept. 22 issue of *The Mercury* shone a spotlight on the grant's controversial nature by running numerous back-and-forth letters to the editor, where students called the grant "blood money" and administrators called students opposing it "zealots." On Oct. 16, the Jonsson building was vandalized with the phrase "Scrap Star Wars at UTD." These events led to the formation of Faculty and Students Against Star Wars; the group would go on to organize the Oct. 28 protest, which included poetry, plays and chalk art.

"Waterviewgate," playing on the 1974 Watergate scandal, began June 22, when 119 residents of the Waterview apartments, which now comprise phases 1-3 of the University Village, received notice they were being evicted to make space for a new cohort of freshmen. Residents quickly organized a week of protests, which led to campus administrators working with the third-party owner of the apartments, Worthing Inc., to relocate the residents to other apartments in the area owned by the company.

UTD had four recorded protests between 1980-2009, four protests between 2010-2019 and has seen 20 protests since 2020. With the rise of student activism, UTD administration has reacted with new policy measures, including restricting the types of stands students can use to advertise and prohibiting political chalking, and has attempted imposing punishments on arrested protesters such as deferred suspension and denial of degree. However, the punitive administrative response after May 1 has not deterred the current cohort of student activists on campus. In a press release to *The Retrograde*, SJP stated it remains committed to its demands for divestment with the goal of continuing to make Palestine "unavoidable."

"We recognize that as the [year] comes to a close, our work towards liberation is only beginning," SJP wrote in the press release. "In every ceremony, in all parts of campus, we will continue to confront and disrupt. Until UTD and UTMICO [the investment managing company for the UT System] divest, we will continue to take action."

Those interested in information regarding the recorded protests in UTD's history can reach out to theretrogradenews@gmail.com for article scans and additional information.

COUNCIL
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

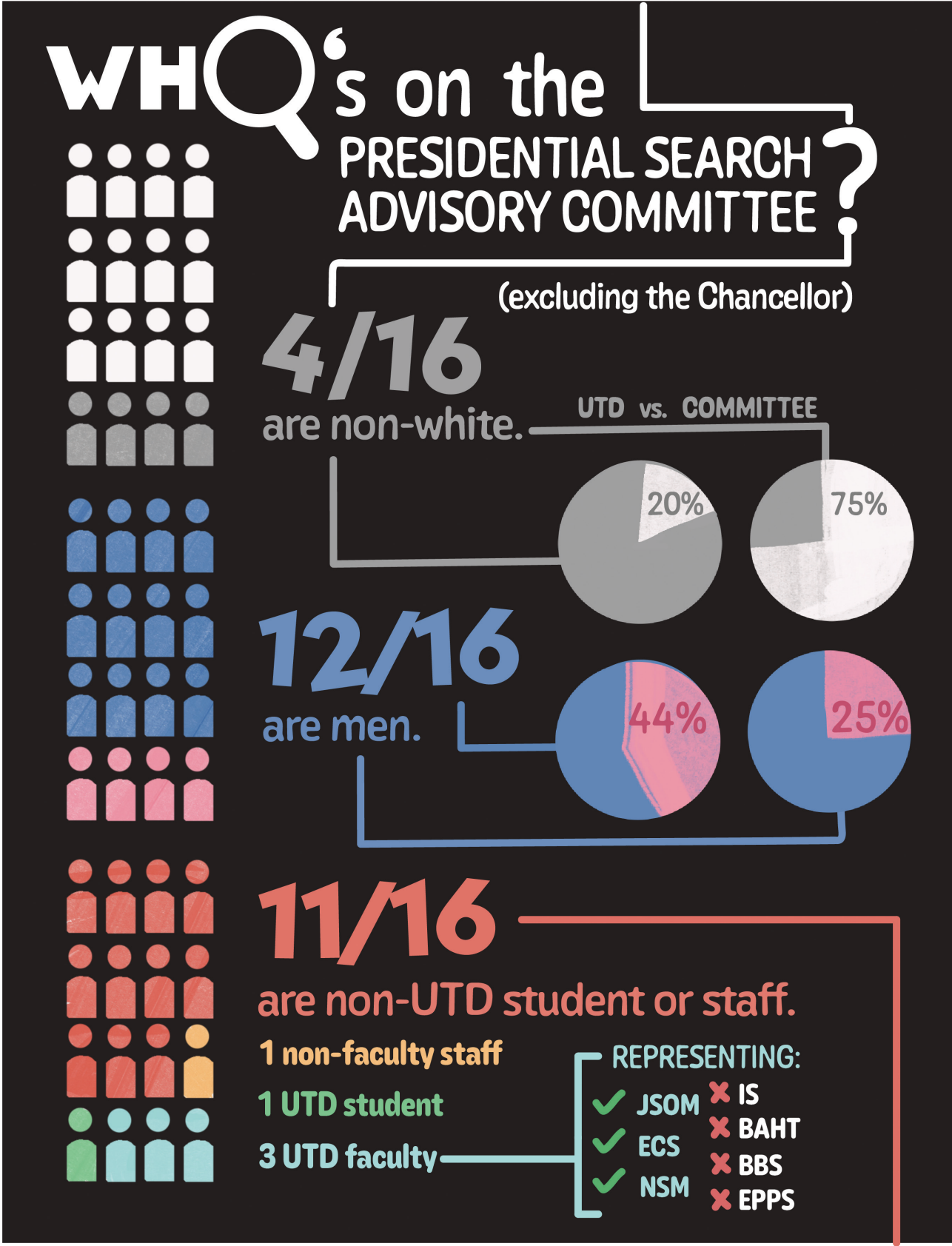
Excluding UT System Chancellor and committee chair James Milliken, of the 16 individuals selected for the committee, women and people of color are dramatically underrepresented compared to the demographics at UTD. As of fall 2024, the university has a 44% female student body while 25% of the committee members are female, and a 20.03% white student body while the com-

mittee is 75% white.

Since the committee formed in fall 2024 after President Richard Benson announced his intent to resign, it has set up a website hosting all publicly available information about the search process. Visitors can currently view the presidential position's description, a list of committee members, committee rules and a history of official meetings, and

submit comments and nominations through the website. A virtual town hall meeting to collect more public comments was hosted by the Academic Senate Jan. 21.

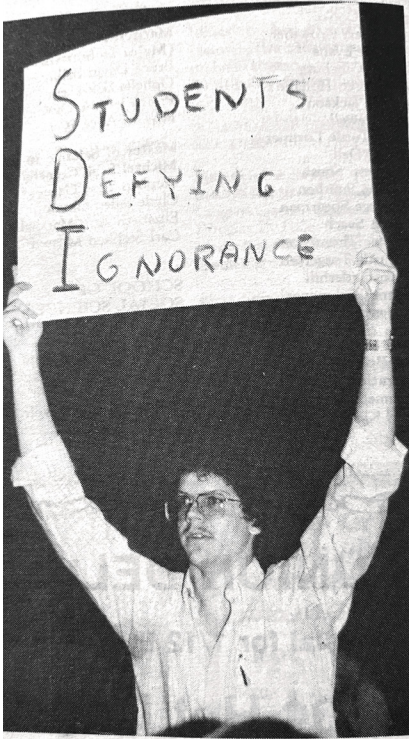
This article is part of a series following and analyzing the search for UTD's next president. Follow The Retrograde through its print issue or online at retrogradenews.com to keep up with latest stories.



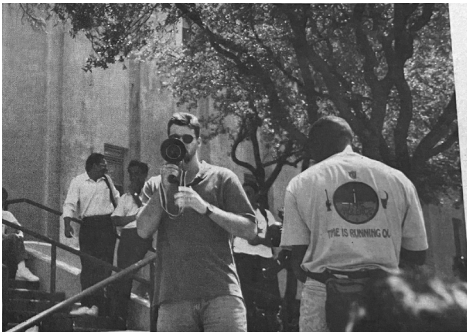
YIYI DING | RETROGRADE STAFF

HISTORY OF PROTEST

1986: Star Wars



1993: Waterviewgate



2021: Slut Walk



April 2024: Sit-In



2023: Spirit Rocks



2000: Bush-Fox



SCANS TAKEN FROM THE MERCURY | ARCHIVES

PHOTOS BY KATHERYN HO & SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF

ANIKTA SULTANA | RETROGRADE STAFF

May 2024: Encampment



A NEW FRONTIER IN DFW

Everything is bigger in Texas, including the anime conventions, and Anime Frontier 2024 shook up the metroplex over a full weekend



PHOTOS BY SURJADITYA SARKAR | RETROGRADE STAFF

MAR OLOGBAN
Staff Writer

During the weekend of Dec. 6, the streets of downtown Fort Worth bustled with cosplayers of all ages heading toward the Fort Worth Convention Center, which hosted Anime Frontier for its third year.

Anime Frontier, the sister convention to Anime NYC, is one of the premiere anime conventions in the southern U.S., typically held in DFW. The convention offers many opportunities not typically available to American fans of Japanese franchises, such as arcade machines straight from Japan, fighting game tournaments, idol fests and exclusive anime premieres, as well as an environment for fans to show off their cosplays.

Typical convention cosplays usually feature characters from newly-released anime like “Dandadan,” or very widely popular continuous anime such as “Jujutsu Kaisen” and “One Piece.” But because of the large number of attendees at Anime Frontier, conventiongoers can find things they didn’t expect. Psychology senior Akira Thompson, one of the many Comets at the convention, said she was pleasantly surprised by the number of fans of older anime.

“Something special that caught my eye was the amount of old school anime cosplayers that were present,” Thompson said. “I grew up watching mid to late 2000s anime so seeing cosplays such as ‘Soul Eater’ and ‘Noragami’ made me happy.”

A main attraction at almost any fan convention are panel events, usually hosted by a fan with a lot of knowledge about a specific topic, a company premiering an anime or professionals from the anime industry sharing their perspectives. Anime Frontier offered a highlight panel that brought together multiple star voice actors for a comedy show called LAVA. The comedy trio of Robbie Daymond, known for voicing Megumi Fushiguro from “Jujutsu Kaisen,” Max Mittleman, who voices Arataki Itto from Genshin Impact, and Ray Chase, known as the voice of Noctis Calceum from Final Fantasy XV, were one of the highlights of Thompson’s weekend.

“I visited one of their panels back in 2021 at another con and seeing it again was just as exciting,” Thompson said. “You can tell Robbie, Ray and Max are really good friends and complement each other’s humors very well.”

While many convention attendees don’t intend to host events or be in the spotlight, Anime Frontier offered opportunities for those looking for more involvement. The Cosplay Masquerade cosplay contest highlighted some of the best craftsmanship in the building and the Wild West Idol Fest, with its multitude of energetic performances, celebrated Japanese idol culture. One of the performers, Madison Lloyd,

is in Tokimeki Sensation, a cosplay and dance group themed around the anime “Love Live!” One of Lloyd’s main focuses for 2024 was the Idol Fest.

“It was the first idol fest I’ve gotten to perform in, and I had so much fun dancing and being a new member of the troupe,” Lloyd said. “The Idol Fest truly is such a magical moment at cons and feeling the infectious energy of the crowd screaming and cheering us all on made me so incredibly happy.”

With thousands of people attending the convention, many attendees may leave the weekend with new friends. Throughout the weekend, one can find themselves surrounded by others just like them, from conventiongoers on the dance floor attempting K-pop challenges, to fellow enthusiasts milling about the official Gundam pop-up store.

“One thing that makes cons special to me is the company I find myself with, there are very little points in time where I don’t have a friend by my side,” Lloyd said. “I love going to cons and meeting new people and getting to connect with those I’ve met previously at cons or through the cosplay community.”

Anime Frontier brought together people of many ages with a breadth of cosplaying experience. It was a space to feel welcomed in, whether it be their first time cosplaying or their hundredth time. One could find tens of different interpretations of a character while walking around; Temioluwa Ojumu, a computer engineering sophomore, said he could see the creativity oozing from every corner. He was dressed as Rohan Kishibe from “JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure,” one of his first-ever cosplays at a convention.

“It’s always fun to see people bringing their favorite characters to life through cosplay,” Ojumu said. “I’m pretty new to cosplaying, but it was a huge confidence boost getting compliments from people passing by or getting asked to have a picture taken.”

At the end of the day, conventions like Anime Frontier provide a space for niche interests, franchises and hobbies to thrive, along with the communities that support and engage with them despite occasional ostracism. Ojumu said it’s the community that makes conventions special for him to attend.

“It is great being around hundreds, or even thousands of other people who share the same interests as I do without being judged or looked at weirdly for it,” Ojumu said. “Just being able to participate in panels, cosplay, meet voice actors, buy merch, etc. always feels so great when you know you can fully express yourself and not have some loser in the back look at you funny for being weird.”

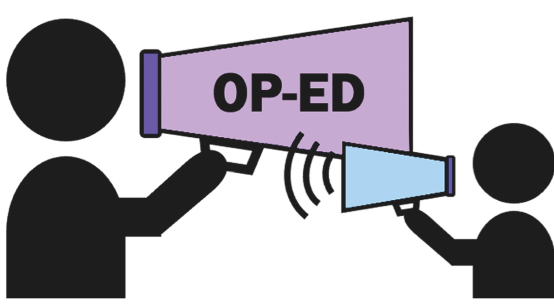


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Editorial

A brief history of student expression

Though indictments of UTD's repressive actions toward students are rising, it's hardly new behavior from the university



RAINIER PEDERSON | RETROGRADE STAFF

On Nov. 12, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression and the Student Press Law Center sent UTD a letter criticizing the university's firing of Mercury Editor-in-Chief Gregorio Olivares Gutierrez and the fundamental structure of its oversight over student press, which the organizations claim has led to unconstitutionally censoring its student journalists. The university has not responded to this formal letter as of this article's publication. UTD's disinterest in ensuring students' rights to free speech aren't stifled is a disappointing, but unsurprising continuation to its legacy of flouting law and morality alike to oppose its students' actions.

UTD is not interested in the thoughts, activities or needs of its student body the second it becomes an inconvenience. 2024 has been one of, if not the worst, years for student expression, resources and protections on campus.

The year kicked off with SB 17 going into effect Jan. 1, rendering all diversity, equity and inclusion offices and initiatives within Texas universities effectively illegal. In response to this bill, UTD shuttered its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and replaced it with the short-lived Office of Campus Resources and Support, intended to maintain whatever ODEI resources and programs could be salvaged. However, OCRS was dissolved before the end of spring 2024 despite legal compliance with the new law. Numerous diversity-based programs, scholarships and support groups, including the Multicultural Center and Galerstein Gender Center, were lost without creating viable alternatives, and the university's lack of transparency and disorganization regarding the transition away from ODEI made accessing whatever resources survived — now scattered throughout UTD's bureaucratic maze — a daunting and difficult task.

UTD quickly went from a campus that provided for its diverse student body well enough to earn national recognition to one where students were forced to pick up the projects previously organized by professional staff. These efforts include, notably, Student Govern-

ment undertaking and funding the annual Lavender Graduation in 2024, previously overseen by the now-defunct Galerstein Gender Center. Instead of mere compliance with state law, UTD's overcaution and paranoia around anything that a legislator might theoretically interpret as "DEI" has created a worse administration and unhappier students, due in part to significant gaps in university support systems for students — particularly ethnic, cultural and queer minorities.

Students, naturally, will lose faith in the goodwill of an administration that, when asked to cut down a tree, razes down the whole forest, and while resources for minority students disappear, the university's promotional rhetoric celebrating the student body's diversity and international focus has not slowed. Clearly UTD values diversity only as a selling point.

These unacceptable behaviors from UTD's leadership, while worsening in recent years, are part of a historical pattern of disinterest — and hostility — toward its students, and mirror other historical and current-day examples of higher education opposing and throttling its students' will. In spring 2023, Student Government's resolution calling on UTD to divest from arms manufacturers that support Israel's war effort fell on deaf ears, with President Richard Benson going out of his way to express disdain for the resolution in a letter to The Texas Jewish Post on April 26 that year.

This disinterest came into starker relief as the semester continued, with years of pro-Palestine student demonstrations only resulting in an audience with the Office of the President after a seven hour sit-in at the Administration Building. The apathy revealed itself as active hostility on May 1, when UTD followed in the footsteps of schools like UT Austin by summoning over 60 law enforcement officers in riot gear to storm a peaceful pro-Palestine encampment organized at Chess Plaza. Police officers hit community members and local journalists, destroyed property and arrested 21 total individuals, who were held overnight at Collin County Jail. Students dared to oppose war and genocide by organizing for divestment, following

in the footsteps of anti-apartheid university protesters that similarly demanded divestment from South Africa, and university officials responded by orchestrating the largest arrest in recorded campus history.

After their arrests, students faced academic punishments like deferred suspension and denial of degree at the whims of Student Affairs, which circumvented its own established disciplinary procedures to deal with these students. When Ravi Prakash, computer science professor and former speaker of the Academic Senate, questioned Dean of Students Amanda Smith about this underhanded, non-communicative approach during the Oct. 16 senate meeting, she told him "not to get

“ Students, naturally, will lose faith in the goodwill of an administration that, when asked to cut down a tree, razes down the whole forest. ”

riled up” and derided him for not being civil.

Circumventions for the sake of convenience would continue with the fall 2024 death of *The Mercury*, UTD's previous student-run newspaper, whose 40-year run was cut short when Student Affairs removed Gregorio Olivares Gutierrez as Editor-in-Chief of the publication before suspending all Mercury emails, took down the website twice and fired the staff that went on strike to protest the removal — which was the entire staff. Following months of tension between student journalists and administration because of *The Mercury's* critical coverage of May 1, the removal itself was based in shaky reasoning and conducted rudely and unprofessionally, and revealed major, easily-abused holes in the Student Media bylaws that governed *The Mercury*.

When students appealed the re-

moval as per the bylaws, the Office of Student Affairs disregarded the bylaws' established procedures — even though technicalities in those same bylaws were used to fire Olivares. Afterward, when Student Government and the Academic Senate attempted to organize meetings to review what had happened, Student Affairs responded by telling these groups to stay in their lanes and that Student Affairs would handle the Mercury situation. The university's actions were so obviously biased and destructive that non-profit advocacy groups like the Foundation of Individual Rights and Expression and Student Press Law Center said the university was flouting its constitutional obligations to protect students' free expression. At no point has administration engaged with *The Mercury's* strike demands since the firing.

The arrests on May 1 aren't unique, and they aren't unprecedented. How did we get to the point where campus administrators feel comfortable attacking students, or ridiculing and arresting professors? It's a natural extension of a dangerous preexisting university culture: one where campus administrators are comfortable demoting and firing student media advisers on a whim; one where the Dean of Students can change policy regarding the Student Code of Conduct without consulting the Academic Senate, Staff Council or Student Government beforehand; one where using chalk on campus is prohibited because it could be used to spread messages the university does not approve of, but a Heritage Foundation executive is welcomed to campus and showered in awards. All of this can be attributed to the breakdown in trust between campus administration and the students and faculty it oversees. Faculty and students come to UTD with the goal of conducting research, teaching and learning, while campus administration only seems interested in silencing expression it dislikes and appeasing its donors.

Administration is blinded by its lust for a squeaky-clean image and financial gain. In its pursuit for profit and growth, a dangerous bubble of policy and negligence has been created that endangers the whole campus community, not just stu-

dents. University employees openly criticize UTD's flippancy toward its constituents' various needs, finding material resources, team sizes and other supports for researchers and staff dragging behind while flashy expansionist projects continue.

We do not have to live like this. Schools like the University of Connecticut, Maryland University, the University of Michigan and Rice University — to name a few — have all reaffirmed their commitment to diversity and inclusion on their campuses despite opposition to DEI programs. Institutions like Trinity College in Ireland and the University of Brussels in Belgium have heeded their students' calls to divest from war and genocide. While no school is perfect, it is rare for a university to show such flagrant disregard for the very community it claims to serve — by policing and punishing it; by ignoring its demands raised through "proper" legal channels; by treating its own rules, which should ensure fair and consistent governance, as completely optional when convenient.

Events like the May 1 arrests and the dissolution of *The Mercury* prove one important fact, however: direct, organized action is the most successful way for students' voices to be heard at UTD, and student movements that dare to disrupt and know their own worth will be the future of ground-up change at UTD.

Such movements — with real stakes and hard, thankless work — are daunting, difficult and frequently end in disaster. But success stories abound all over the country, if one knows where to look. *The Harvard Crimson*, *Daily Bruin*, *Daily Californian* and *The Collegian* are just some of the student newspapers who have broken away from their universities' administration and prospered independently, defeating the "common knowledge" that student projects will crumble without university support. UTD is home to over 30,000 students with a dizzying array of backgrounds and skillsets; the capacity to challenge administration's apathy and persevere through its hostility squarely rests with us. The only question is whether the student body will allow these injustices to become the new normal and forget they can be fought at all.

Gregorio Olivares Gutierrez

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